RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT PROGRAMS

Concerns Regarding Abuse and Death in Certain Programs for Troubled Youth

What GAO Found

GAO found thousands of allegations of abuse, some of which involved death, at residential treatment programs across the country and in American-owned and American-operated facilities abroad between the years 1990 and 2007. Allegations included reports of abuse and death recorded by state agencies and the Department of Health and Human Services, allegations detailed in pending civil and criminal trials with hundreds of plaintiffs, and claims of abuse and death that were posted on the Internet. For example, during 2005 alone, 33 states reported 1,619 staff members involved in incidents of abuse in residential programs. GAO could not identify a more concrete number of allegations because it could not locate a single Web site, federal agency, or other entity that collects comprehensive nationwide data.

GAO also examined, in greater detail, 10 closed civil or criminal cases from 1990 through 2004 where a teenager died while enrolled in a private program. GAO found significant evidence of ineffective management in most of the 10 cases, with program leaders neglecting the needs of program participants and staff. This ineffective management compounded the negative consequences of (and sometimes directly resulted in) the hiring of untrained staff; a lack of adequate nourishment; and reckless or negligent operating practices, including a lack of adequate equipment. These factors played a significant role in the deaths GAO examined. See the table below for detailed information related to three of the case studies.

<p>| Examples of Case Studies GAO Examined |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex/age</th>
<th>Date of death</th>
<th>Cause of death</th>
<th>Case details</th>
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| Female, 15 | May 1990 | Dehydration | • Showed signs of illness for 2 days, such as blurred vision, vomiting water, and frequent stumbling  
• Program staff thought she was faking her illness to get out of the program  
• Collapsed and died while hiking  
• Lay dead in the road for 18 hours  
• Program brochure advertised staff as “highly trained survival experts” |
| Male, 15 | Sept. 2000 | Internal bleeding | • Head-injury victim with behavioral challenges who refused to return to campsite  
• Restrained by staff and held face down in the dirt for 45 minutes  
• Died of a severed artery in the neck  
• Death ruled a homicide |
| Male, 14 | July 2002 | Hyperthermia (high body temperature) | • Experienced difficulty while hiking and sat down, breathing heavily and moaning  
• Fainted and lay motionless  
• One staff member hid behind a tree for 10 minutes to see whether the victim was “faking it”  
• Staff member returned and found no pulse  
• Died soon afterwards |

Source: Records including police reports, legal documents, and state investigative documents.